

2015/14

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Pocket Watch – Carry on Minister

Introduction

The general election over and Ministers in place, attention this week has been switching to what lies ahead for the world of education. Commentators and others have been rushing forward to offer their thoughts. Head teacher Tom Sherrington put his in an open letter to Nicky Morgan urging her to remove what he termed 'a constant gun to the head' (no pun intended;) the TES listed 'seven things that a Conservative government might mean for schools' including more of some things such as tests and free schools and less of other things, principally money; the professional bodies have already combined to urge the new government to 'protect all education funding' while Professor Chris Husbands, Aaron Porter, FE's AoC and 157 Group, and Leora Cruddas are among those who have offered insightful blogs on future policy possibilities.

Arguably two schools of thought are emerging. On the one hand are those who believe that the Conservatives will not be able to be very radical in an area like education largely because they have bigger fish to fry, Europe for a start and will be strapped for cash as they battle to eradicate the deficit by the end of the next Parliament. Then there are those who think that unencumbered now by Coalition partners, the Party will be able to push through a much more radical agenda particularly in the area of schools where early legislation is anticipated.

Initial comments from both the Education Secretary and the BIS Secretary offer few clues. Nicky Morgan has suggested that her top priorities '*would be to tackle school performance and ensure lots of good and excellent teachers across England*' while Sajid Javid has stressed that apprenticeships, jobs and youth training would remain important issues for his dept. All of which suggests business as usual, a case of Carry on Minister perhaps, but the Tory manifesto had 38 pledges for education and it's in here that we should find the real clues as to what lies ahead.

Here's a summary of some of the key points under four headings: funding; schools; FE; HE.

Funding

Funding remains the big concern for many people in the education system. The manifesto commits the government to "*eliminating the deficit in a sensible and balanced way.*" This will mean among other things finding a further £13bn from dept savings and £12bn from welfare savings all on top of the £21bn of savings found in the last Parliament. It may broadly be the same rate of savings as the last five years but as the IFS have indicated, it'll be a lot harder this time round because to use the cliché, '*the low hanging fruit has already been lopped.*' It's not known at this stage if there'll be an early Budget as there was in 2010 but there will be a Spending Review later this year and with both DfE and BIS now headed up by Ministers with Treasury experience, education will be looking for both to secure as good a settlement as possible. As things stand the manifesto funding pledges include:

- For schools: to continue the pupil premium, although at current rates, to invest £7bn for school places over the next five years, to protect the per-pupil funding of 5-16 year olds and to make school funding fairer,
- For FE: to make it easier for employers to take on apprentices by scrapping National Insurance contributions for under 25 age apprentices and for other new workers through the Employment Allowance
- For HE: to introduce a national loan system for postgrads

But it also promises among other things 500 more free schools, 3m more apprenticeships and a lifting of the cap on university student numbers, all of which will require some investment. Lots of figures were bandied about before the election about what the impact of continuing austerity might mean for different parts of the education system, anything from 6% to 10% cuts for schools and double that or more for some parts of the hard-pressed FE sector.

So what to look out for now? Obviously the Spending Review later this year as that will set the funding picture for the next 2/3 years. Elsewhere schools may want to keep an eye out, finally, for the new national funding formula and potential multi-year spending plans which were endorsed in the last debate on school funding in March and due for completion next year. Things remain bleak for Sixth Form Colleges (SFE) and FE providers. A funding uplift for large programmes is promised for 16-19 provision but as the SFE argued before the election, the sector needs £1000 more per student to be able to deliver a decent programme. FE will no doubt look out for the NAO report on the financial health of the sector due out this summer and further ahead on how the apprenticeship voucher system, which was announced before the election and due to come in by 2017, will operate. As for HE, the manifesto remains clear that it's sticking with the current fee regime but the issue will be whether a further fee increase is on the cards. There had been pre-election talk of a rise to £10,000, even £12,000 so it will be interesting to see if there's a strong push from some vice-chancellors for this to happen

Schools

Most of the manifestos had plenty to say about schools and the Conservative manifesto was no different. David Cameron talked during the campaign about restoring '*rigour, discipline and excellence*' in schools and that's pretty much the tone throughout with more stick than carrot. Three particular sticks include a much stronger focus on the core essentials through the use of resit KS2 tests, universal adoption of EBacc subjects and support for STEM subjects; second, continued use of school system reform as a way of raising standards, parachuting in new leadership where necessary and creating more free schools; and third, a heavy reliance on accountability measures whether through Ofsted ratings or PISA tables to keep everyone on their toes. Some of the assumptions about what generates success may stretch credibility but the message is clear. As for what's missing, there's not much on teacher development and support and there's nothing in the manifesto on the management of the new school system particularly as it continues to diversify, although announcements on Commissioner powers are expected shortly or on skills training for young people, no mention for instance of a 14-19 Bacc of any sort. The emphasis seems entirely, as the Education Secretary indicated, on school performance and measures needed to raise this

FE

FE remains a fairly foreign land for much of the manifesto where apprenticeships form the centre piece of the Party's commitment to skills training. Potentially some of the promised 3m new places will come from the pledge to '*replace lower-level classroom-based FE courses with high-level quality apprenticeships*' but the rest will require concerted efforts by both government and employers. The dept is due to release further data on earnings and destination measures this summer and this data drive looks set to continue as does the development of a network of specialist National Colleges. Beyond these, the Party has already set out a dual vision for the sector around high-level professional skills and second chance opportunities for those who left school without the skills they needed for which a consultation is due to complete next month. The new BIS Secretary may want to put his own stamp on it but as a ten-year vision it pretty much sets the scene. The big challenge, however, remains how to create a stable funding regime to support the level of skills training needed to drive economic recovery and opportunity

HE

Finally, briefly HE where as with the other sectors, the overriding message is carry on as before but where the arrival of a new, well-connected minister may make things more interesting. For the moment the three things to look out for include: any groundswell for an increase in fees, a continued clampdown on the visa system and sponsors, and a new teaching quality framework



Steve Besley
Head of Policy

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Carry on Minister. May 2015